

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Sermon Series: Romans – Jesus’ Gospel Sets You Free!

A Hopeful Word for the Long Haul

(Romans 15:1-13)

Study #26

Introduction: Sticking to it when you come to a sticking point...

In 1 Corinthians 13, the Apostle Paul promises that love never fails. He says that it bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love is patient and kind. Love is never jealous or arrogant.

You and I hunger for THAT love from birth.

We get imperfect servings of this kind of perfect love from moms and dads, from siblings and friends. In marriage, we get glimpses of the 1 Corinthians variety of love. And in church, too, love often breaks out.

But the ultimate source of the perfect love we crave, and the only consistent supply of this love is from our God, who gave His only begotten Son for us.

Today, we affirm that there is nothing better than to be perfectly loved AND there is nothing better than to grow in the grace of being loving, ourselves.

Then, over in the book of Hebrews we read that God smiles when we trust Him. In fact, he says that without trust - or FAITH - it is impossible to please God.

To grow as a Christian is to grow in faith. It is to increasingly take God at His word, to boldly act on His promises, and to embrace the central biblical idea that God is good.

Faith moves mountains. Faith holds on to an unseen reality. Faith has broken down city walls, conquered kingdoms, quenched the power of fire, and shut the mouths of lions.

Faith, depending on God, is counting on Him to do what only He can do. It’s not us, it is Him who changes lives, saves souls, touches hearts, reconciles fractured relationships, and breaks addictions.

Love and faith are indispensable Christian virtues. We don’t get far in our journey with Jesus if we don’t grasp His love and faithfulness. And we don’t progress toward maturity if we don’t learn to love and trust.

But there are times in life when another grace is called for.

When life has repeatedly thrown you curves that you can’t hit, or when trials pile on higher and higher, you need the grace of hope if you’re going to carry on. When you are assigned a task that, over time, seems more and more daunting, what you need is hope.

If I don’t have hope that a given assignment is going to be worth the work in the end, I’ll quit. I’ll quit on an assignment to dig a hole if the second half of that assignment is to fill the hole back in.

If I’m assigned the task of guarding Zach Randolph in the NBA Western Conference Finals this afternoon, I won’t even suit up. If I have no hope of carrying out the assignment, I’ll quit - often and early.

So, how do we crash through quitting points when the temptation to quit is strong? That courage to keep moving forward comes when we exercise the strong muscle of hope.

This morning, Paul gives us one of his more daunting assignments. But he doesn’t just give us an order and dismiss us to obey. He also provides us with great hope in the example of Jesus, in the truths of Scripture, and in the promises of God.

For some time now, Paul has been speaking about issues of liberty in Jesus, the problem of judging, and Weak and Strong Christians.

Today he wraps up those themes by laying a burden squarely on the shoulders of the Strong.

Jesus: Our Hopeful Model for a Life of Ministry (vv. 1-3)

An “Others-Centered” Life (vv. 1-2)

The strong are to help the weak (v. 1)

“Bearing weaknesses” (v. 1a)

[1] Now we who are strong ought to bear¹ the weaknesses of those without strength...

The Strong are obliged to “*bear the weaknesses*” of the Weak.

This is not the same as the obligation we all have to “*bear with one another*” (Colossians 3:13).² Or, as we have it in one place in the Gospels, when Jesus was dealing with the disciples, “*putting up with one another.*”

One time, after the disciples were unable to cast out a demon from a man because of their own lack of faith, Jesus - the perfect Man - turned to them in what seems to me to look like frustration and said, *[Matthew 17:17] “How long shall I put up with you?”*

THIS, here in Romans 15, is not THAT!

Instead, this is a call for those who are Strong to flex their muscles, use whatever strength they have, and help the Weak.³ The Strong are to take some of the weight off the shoulders of the Weak, and carry it themselves.

In the early years of my days backpacking with my sons, Ben and Zach, I would carry a larger load than they did. When they were twelve and fourteen, they couldn’t carry a five day load of supplies into the mountains. It was only right that I should have carried more.

¹ When Paul speaks of “*bearing the weaknesses*” of others he uses the same word as is used of Christ bearing His cross (bastazo - Greek, βασταζω) in the Gospels.

² He means by this that we are to put up with each others’ idiosyncrasies and quirks, along with our weaknesses and sins, and love each other as Christ loved us.

³ This is the same thought that we find in Galatians 6:2, in the words, *[Galatians 6:2] Bear one another’s burdens, and thus fulfill the law of Christ.*

Not so much anymore. These days when we head off on the trail, I’m more likely to be seen off-loading my stuff into their packs when they’re not looking (or adding rocks in their packs to slow them down).

People who have strength in some area of life have real advantages. When you have strength - physical, mental, emotional, spiritual - you have freedom to maneuver. You have options. AND you in Jesus who are Strong have an inescapable obligation to help those without strength.

It would be a crazy, mixed up world if the Weak were expected to carry the Strong!

Yes, and sadly, throughout history, we see exactly that. In many places in society, the Strong lord it over those who are Weak, take advantage of the less advantaged, and steal privileges from the already under-privileged.

That is not how it is supposed to be in Jesus. In Jesus, the Strong help the Weak. It is counter-cultural to be strong and to use that strength to help the weak, but that it what we are to do.

That’s the first thought. And that first thought leads Paul to his second thought.

Strong Christians should not just please themselves (v. 1b)

[1] Now we who are strong ought to bear the weaknesses of those without strength AND NOT JUST PLEASE OURSELVES.

That last phrase - “*and not just please ourselves*” - is one of the most radical things Paul ever wrote. We are not to be committed to pleasing ourselves at any cost.

That’s the kind of thought that’ll give you a headache because it is natural for us to look out for #1. We instinctively look out for our own interests, and that’s OK. Really, it is. It is human, not sinful, for you to be concerned about the things that concern you.

Paul says here, though, that you are not *only* to live to please yourself. You are also to have on your radar a commitment to please others.

You are not to be so committed to pleasing yourself that you don't take into account the effect that looking out for #1 might have on the #2's and #3's in your life.

And, of course, where the rubber meets the road is when what I want to do to serve my self-interest gets in the way of someone else's interests. Am I then willing to forego my legitimate pleasures so as to benefit and bless and love my neighbor?

Hang on to that thought and listen as Paul urges us even further down the road of love.

We all are to build up our neighbor (v. 2)

[2] Let each of us please his neighbor for his good, to his edification.

Note that there are words after ***“please his neighbor.”*** It is not that we are to go around giving our neighbor flattering courtesies. No, we are to do our neighbor good.

We are to love our neighbor. That's a strong thing. It is to give our neighbor what she needs rather than just what she wants.

We are to please our neighbor by acting in ways that are ***“for his good, to his edification.”***

And if the idea of edification doesn't resonate, just think ***“building up”*** because it is the exact same word Paul used in Romans 14:19 when he told us to ***“pursue the things which make for...the building up of one another.”***

Your friend's life is under construction. God wants you to add bricks and boards to his life, to help him grow. THAT is what *edification* is all about!

To be all about edification is to have a radical orientation to life! But, this orientation comes with a price. For me to commit to building you up just might mean that at some points my own needs and wants might not be taken care of.

THAT is a problem! To live this way - where I know that my own needs and wants will be unfulfilled - seems noble and commendable and godly. And it seems unreasonable and hard and painful.

How am I supposed to live this way?!

Well, we keep reading and discover some of how the Apostle Paul was able to bear the weaknesses of those without strength, and to please his neighbor for his good to his edification.

The strategy he employed wasn't tricky and it wasn't complicated. He found hope to carry on by making a very straightforward decision to remember Jesus.

Paul was convinced that whatever inconvenience or challenge he had to endure to please and to build up others could never compare with the pain and hardship and reproach Jesus endured to please and to build us up.

An “Others-Centered” Savior (v. 3)

[3a] For even Christ did not please Himself

A review of the life of Jesus

Even Jesus

Notice that word, ***“even”***. ***“Even”*** is there because if anyone might have legitimately sought to please Himself, it was Christ.

He was the Son of God. Yet He, more than anyone else in history, practiced what Paul is preaching here. He was strong and He helped the weak.

Think about it. Think of the times when Jesus might have been especially tempted to please Himself.

Even when...

Christ chose to not please Himself at the Incarnation. At Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus, the God-Man. He was born in the Bethlehem stables. His first cradle was a barnyard feeding trough.

As a small child, it was only by His parents making a mad dash to Egypt that He escaped murder at the hands of the mad King Herod.

Back in Galilee, He endured the hardships of being raised in a poor family who lived among an oppressed people.

At the launch of His three year ministry, He went to the desert to be alone with God, and endured forty days of not eating. At any point during those forty days He could have turned the plentiful desert stones into bread to satisfy His appetite. But, He didn't. He never planned to use His powers to benefit Himself.

I've got to believe that there were times, while He was traveling around with His disciples, when He would have loved to have taken more time for rest. He didn't, and that was for their sakes. He was often exhausted - and that was for them.

John tells us (John 6) that after He fed thousands of people with a few small loaves of bread and some fish, the clamoring throngs cried out to make Him king. Then, as always, Jesus chose to not please Himself. He didn't accept their crown because He was committed, first, to a cross.

Can't you imagine that during many of His confrontations with the religious rulers who rejected and abused Him - Him! God Incarnate!! - He was tempted⁴ to prove that He truly was who He claimed to be through a show of divine power? He didn't, though, because He didn't come to earth to please Himself, to show off, or to impress people with His power.

And then, most especially on the cross, when He took on Himself your sin and mine, He did not please Himself.⁵

⁴ Hebrews 2:18 says that He was tempted - yet He never succumbed to any temptation to sin!

⁵ Here in Romans 15, Paul focuses on Jesus' commitment to serve us, just as he did in Philippians 2, where we read this: *[5] Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, [6] who, although He existed in the form of God did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, [7] but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. [8] Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

Paul was able to do what he exhorts us to do here by remembering Jesus. ***“Even Christ did not please Himself...”***

And if Jesus, the God-Man, the King of kings and the Sovereign Lord, was more committed to pleasing others than to pleasing Himself, then surely we can do the same.

So that is how Jesus lived. And it's not a surprise that He lived this way because even before He was born, there were predictions that this was the course the Messiah's life would take.

A preview to the life of Jesus (v. 3b)

[3b] but as it is written, “THE REPROACHES OF THOSE WHO REPROACHED YOU FELL UPON ME.”⁶

That line is taken from Isaiah, chapter 53, a passage written hundreds of years before Jesus' birth. Isaiah 53 contains some of the clearest predictions of Jesus' career found anywhere in the Old Testament.

In quoting this particular verse, Paul reminds us that the Messiah, Jesus, was always set to be a Suffering Servant before He would become a Conquering King. He would be a God-ordained Victim upon whom would fall the reproaches that were intended for God.

Catch what is being said.

It is true that Christ bore the hostility of angry, hateful people who hurled abuse at Him while He was on the cross - but that is not the issue here. *It is true* that Christ bore God's hostility toward all people on the cross, but that's not the point here, either.

The *point* is that Christ willingly took upon Himself the guilt of people's hostility toward God.

We would have all been held liable for our animosity toward God, but Jesus took that liability on Himself so that we wouldn't bear the guilt of our hatred of God!

⁶ This verse (Psalm 69:9) was interpreted early on by the church as a prophecy of Christ's suffering.

Jesus was not out to please Himself at all!

And, no, of course we can't imitate every element of Christ's life. We can't take on the sin of the world as He did.

But, still, Jesus our Savior and Lord, also serves as our Model. For our sakes, He was willing to go to extreme lengths to serve us and to help us.

So, here's the applicational zinger.

A zinger of an application

As Jesus' followers, as people who have received His grace and mercy and love, we are also to put aside our self-pleasing ways and please our neighbor, for his good, to his edification.

That's what a guy named Barnabas did when he sponsored a new believer named Saul (later to be called "Paul") and helped get him started on his Jesus-following journey. (Acts 9) That move took guts!

That's what Duane and Sharon Miller did when they decided to serve Jesus by serving Arabs, cross-culturally, with their young children, in Israel.

That's what you do when you show hospitality to neighbors in Jesus' Name, or when you take time to press God and His Word into your regular family time, or when you go out of your way to tell a co-worker what Jesus means to you.

Paul remembers Jesus' most awe-inspiring accomplishment (salvation through His death on the cross) to fuel hope for helping the weak.

Christ set the pattern and we follow His example. And, remember, while we generally like and even love each other, He gave Himself ***"to please us, for our good, to our edification,"*** when we were His sworn enemies! There is hope to be found in the example of Jesus.

Now, here's the rub.

Just as it was for Jesus, your love and your service will not always be appreciated.

There will be times when you give yourself to build up your neighbor, your spouse, your kids, your parents, your brother or sister, your roommate or your best friend - and your help is received with a yawn. It is thrown back at you. It is not reciprocated.

What do you do then? Quit? Give up? Throw in the towel?

No, that time when you are tempted to wonder if showing love will be worth it in the end is when you need a fresh infusion of hope.

So, in the remainder of our time this morning we are going to look at the two prime sources for finding hope when the assignment to love, to serve, and to build up seems overwhelming.

First, we look to Scripture.

Scripture: A Source of Hope (v. 4)

The Old Testament - Written for Our Instruction (v. 4a)

[4a] For whatever was written in earlier times was written for our instruction

Earlier times = Old Testament

Obviously, from Paul's vantage point ***"earlier times"*** is a reference to what we call the Old Testament. There is nothing written in the Old Testament that is not for us, today.

The poetry is for us, as is the wisdom literature. The teaching sections and the narratives are for us.

The historical sections, all of the stories, the prophetic sections, the covenants and the commands are ***"for our instruction."***

Throughout the book of Romans Paul has taken great pains to show that the Law is dead. We Christians are no longer under obligation to the Old Testament Law.

So, he can't mean (and he doesn't) that we are to obey every command given in the Old Testament. But that doesn't mean that the Old Testament ceases to have great value for us!

As he says here, it *instructs* us.

More than a textbook - Scripture LIVES!

Which is not to say that the Bible is just like a textbook you use for school that you "learn."

To our surprise, Jesus saved His most scathing rebukes for the people of His day who knew the most about the Bible - the Pharisees. The Pharisees serve as great model of people who knew the Bible without really "knowing" the Bible. They never allowed its truths to ooze into their souls.⁷

But used properly, handled as the living word of God it is, Scripture's instruction is indispensable.

Watch how Paul told the story of Abraham in Romans to *instruct* us about what salvation is really all about.

First, he assumed that we would have some knowledge of the story of Abraham's life. He took it for granted that we, the readers, know about the promise given to Abraham that he would have a son. So, yes, knowledge of the facts of the case is important.

But then, as he reminded us of the story in Genesis 15, he makes a point from Abraham's life.

He shows how, in response to the promise of God, Abraham went outside of his tent, looked up, and believed that God would make his descendants as numerous as the stars of the heavens. But, Paul doesn't stop there.

He used Abraham's story as the foundation for his point that justification before God is always on the basis of faith, never works.

⁷ Even to this day, Hassidic Jews require an amazingly thorough knowledge of the Law from their rabbis. They memorize large sections from the Torah, paying attention to not only the words, but to the number of words, to the position of the words on the written page, and to the number of letters that make up the words.

In this way, Scripture instructs us to trust God.⁸

Facts drawn from and observed from the Bible are useless - in and of themselves. Being able to win at Bible trivia is pretty pointless.

It is when we meditate and ruminate and cogitate on the truths of Scripture, and the Holy Spirit takes what is written and applies it to our hearts that we are *instructed*.

And when we are rightly instructed from Scripture, what will be the result? Listen.

The Old Testament - Written for Our Hope (v. 4b)

[4b]...that through perseverance and the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.

The Scriptures make their way into a discussion of hope because we will be empowered to do just that - hopefully persevere, be faithful, stick to it - as we reflect on the truths of God's Word.

Have you had cause to wonder if there is a God directing the events in the world? Is there anybody "out there"? Turn to Genesis 1, where you will see the highly orchestrated, creative, orderly beginning to our world. It was God who got the whole thing started and He is still at work.

You don't know quite how to express your emotions to God - ALL of your emotions, positive and negative, joy and sorrow, exultation and sadness, grief and anger and despair and confusion? Turn to the Psalms and learn to pray your heart out to God.

Are you wrestling with how to navigate a thorny relational issue? Meditate on Solomon's proverbs and find out how to deal with the sluggard,

⁸ The great scientist Jean Louis Agassiz once remarked, "*Facts are stupid things.*" And, I don't think that it degrades Scripture to agree with him. Separate from how the facts of Scripture touch our lives, they are facts, and nothing more.

the fool, the wicked, the naïve. Learn how important it is to be and to have a foul-weather friend.

Are you going through tough times right now? Read the story of Job and be comforted. And find hope to find, not the answers to your confusing questions, but the Lord Himself in your trials.

Are you facing a stiff challenge? Read the story of Joseph and the story of Esther. They persevered in hard times and overcame by the power of God. You can, too!

Are you dealing with rejection? Jeremiah's the story for you. Feel like you are standing alone for God? Watch how Daniel coped to see how you might, too. Are you reeling from loss? Read Ruth. In Naomi's story you'll find a voice for your own sorrow - and you'll find hope for what only God can provide.

That's just a smattering of ways in which you can find instruction and perseverance and encouragement from *"what was written in earlier times."*⁹

Looking at what was written in earlier times brings us to what will keep us going when we feel like we've hit the wall and just can't continue any longer giving and serving and loving and building up. In Scripture, we find hope.¹⁰

So, when we take up our Bibles and read, we are not just reading a book. We are listening to a Voice - the voice of God. One of the ways by which God imparts perseverance and encouragement and hope to keep on in a daunting assignment is through the message of the Bible.

And, we are strengthened with hope when we turn to God Himself. Listen to the words that Paul has to say about God, especially in verses five and thirteen.

God: The Source of Hope (vv. 5, 13)

⁹ This is exactly the point of Hebrews 11.

¹⁰ If it seems somewhat surprising that "hope" should be singled out for such special emphasis here, we should remember the important role that hope has played throughout Romans, and in the New Testament as a whole.

[5] Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus¹¹... [13] Now may the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you will abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

It is God who gives perseverance and encouragement. It is God who gives hope. He is, in fact, *"the God of hope."*

As a believer in Jesus, your hope is firm that you will spend eternity with God in glory. This life, as long as it may be, and as long as it may seem on a hard day, is by comparison with eternity (as Peter says in 1 Peter 1:6) only *"a little while"* filled with (as Paul says in 2 Corinthians 4:7) *"momentary, light affliction."*

Allow the reality of your eternal future in heaven to fuel you with hope as you give yourself to *"build up"* those around you.

Further, God has promised rich reward to you for faithfulness in this life. There is, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, a *"well done, good and faithful servant"* waiting for you if you do not lose hope here and now.

Jesus knows how to reward those who serve Him and you will be amply rewarded for all the times that you have served your neighbor *"for his good, to his edification."*

And don't lose hope of experiencing the abundant life Jesus promised (John 10). That abundance is offered to us when we imitate Jesus' serving ways, don't live to please ourselves, and depend on God.

Hang on to the hope that God will actually use you to accomplish His will, here and now.

Conclusion:

¹¹ It has been suggested by some that 15:6 is actually the conclusion to the letter to the Romans, and that everything which follows was a later addition. I disagree, but it is easy to understand the sense in which 15:1-6 is a climactic point in the book in terms of a call to apply all that we have been instructed about with strong demonstrations of love. In terms of exhortation, it may be better to see Romans 15:13 as the fitting end to the book.

When we talk about someone “having love” we understand that they are choosing to love. They are being loving. Likewise, those who “have faith” are those who are flexing their faith muscle, reminding themselves of the truth of God as they obey the commands of God.

So also, to “have hope” is to choose to hope, to decide to hope, to flex our hope muscle.

Hope is a strong Christian virtue. Christian hope is the hope which has seen it all, has thrown away rose-colored glasses, has endured much, and still doesn't despair, because it takes God at His Word and looks to ***“the God of hope.”***